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SUBJECT: IEC ENGAGES WOMEN MPS

¶1. With the Embassy and international NGOs as brokers, the Independent Election Commission held a consultative session this week with women MPs to discuss how to increase participation of women in the voter registration process. Although more than 2.5 million Afghans have registered under the current process, with registration in many provinces yet to begin, many female politicians have questioned the IEC's outreach strategy for women. The three-hour Dec. 2 discussion, attended by more than 10 MPs, IEC Chairman Dr. Azizullah Ludin, other IEC commissioners and staff, and several journalists, offered women leaders a chance to directly engage the IEC's leadership on election issues.

¶2. MPs Hawa Alam Nooristani (Nuristan, Pashtun) and Rida Azimi (Parwan, Tajik) asked the IEC to investigate allegations of women not feeling safe to travel to voter registration centers. Other MPs expressed concerns that male family members either prevent women from registering or register for them. Qadria Yasdanparast (Kabul, Tajik), a member of the Lower House's women's affairs committee, told us separately she believes more needs to be done to advertise a recent decree by mullahs endorsing women's voting rights. MPs Shukria Barakzai (Kabul, Pashtun) and Fatima Nazari (Kabul, Hazara) criticized the IEC for delaying its announcement of an election date, tying the confusion over the election's timing to possible voter disillusionment.

¶3. Despite IEC outreach efforts, barriers to full voting rights for women remain an important issue. Until now, women leaders have been slow to bring their concerns to the IEC through proper and effective channels. Strained relations between the IEC and Parliament have contributed to the poor communications. However, this week's gathering brought the IEC closer to the elected representatives of the Afghan people and provided a proper forum for legislators and commissioners to share concerns and propose solutions for making the registration and election processes a success. IEC Deputy Chief Technical Officer Zekria Barakzai said the commission would continue its dialogue with women legislators to address their concerns.

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